Diana Wood, ed. *Women and Religion in Medieval England*. Oxbow, 2003. pp. xiv + 185 + maps & illus.

This book is the result of a weekend conference held by the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, February 16-18, 2001, on the theme of "English Women and Religion, ca. 500-1500." The eight articles collected here, following a preface by Wood, are written by both historians and archaeologists and are presented chronologically, covering the years from the mid-seventh to the early-sixteenth century. There has been no effort to capture a coherent whole of those thousand years but rather to offer a synthesis of work in the area of a particular author's expertise coupled with extensive footnotes that, in most cases, serve as full background reading for the subject under discussion.

Religious women, whether vowed religious or pious laywomen, who are the subjects of these articles, were the most visible women in England during these thousand years. Royal and noble women were indeed visible and survive both as the subjects of extant literature and, in some cases, as authors themselves. Many religious women were royal or noble, but many more were not. However, being actively involved in religious life brought women close to the most literate group in England at the time, clerics. Some, like Abbess Hilda, became objects of clerical writings, which held them up as examples to be admired; others, like Lollard women, survive only in court records of their heresy trials.

Chapter 1, by Sally Crawford, examines burial rituals in Anglo-Saxon England, focusing on the "Final Phase" or "Conversion Period," ca. 650 to 800. Crawford seeks to explain the differences during this period between male and female burials, those with and without grave goods, and those buried within or outside of churchyards. Her investigation is further complicated by furnished graves holding both pagan and Christian symbols with no way of grasping what

these items may have meant to the interred or her survivors. Further, often some members of a family were buried within a churchyard while others (generally males) would be placed in the traditional barrow grave with both pagan and seemingly Christian items. She concludes that when burying their kin, families hoped to display several things: their wealth, social distinction, and claims to land ownership while keeping one foot in the corner of Christianity by having another family member buried within a church yard.

In Chapter 2, Sarah Foot revisits her two-volume work *Veiled Women* (2000),[1] and concludes that she needed to ask a new question and employ a different methodology to "unveil" religious women of the period: "Instead of looking for congregations of religious women and focusing on identifying the places at which they lived, it is more profitable to explore the evidence for religious women themselves" (24). Foot came to the realization that religious women had not disappeared in the tenth and eleventh centuries but rather their religiosity was expressed not through life in the traditional cloister, but through founding on their own property, for their own use, a space that a woman and some of her like-minded friends might live as vowesses, the property reverting to secular, family use at her death.

In Chapter 3, "Women and the Word of God," Henrietta Leyser offers an overview of the role of books in the lives of English women from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. This review chapter, complete with a fourteenth- century illustration of St. Anne teaching the Virgin to read, concludes that in "fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England women, whatever the state of their literacy, were surrounded by books, metaphorical books and actual books [. . .]" (42). Leyser's notes are especially useful for a review of the evidence.

Julian Bond, "Freelance Landscape Archaeologist," in the book's longest chapter, examines the archaeology of medieval nunneries in England and Wales. With charts, graphs, pictures, and maps, Bond sweeps

widely, drawing on the work of Roberta Gilchrist and others, to examine the physical structures of nunneries from the thirteenth century through 1540.[2]

In Chapter 5, Carole Rawcliffe describes the intersection of childbirth and religion in later medieval England. Although she briefly cites Sts Paul and Augustine, and Tertullian, in addition to Mary Douglas, in the main she depends on contemporary theologians like Osbert of Clare to support her case.[3] Christianity had barely penetrated into this basic female experience, and frequently pre-Christian sacred objects and places were called upon during the most harrowing moments a woman might endure. When it could, the Church co-opted these objects and places. It was at the English Reformation, when the "rituals of Church and childbed met that these colourful and increasingly suspect activities gave the greatest offence" (111).

Rowena Archer pronounces, in Chapter 6, "there can surely be no more difficult branch of history than religion," as she examines piety in noblewomen in the later Middle Ages (118). In this well-documented study, Archer focuses on five fabulous (or famous) late medieval noblewomen: Elizabeth de Burgh (d. 1360), Marie St Pol, Countess of Pembroke (d. 1377), Margaret, Lady Hungerford (d. 1378), Cecily Neville (d. 1495), and Margaret Beaufort (d. 1509). Although Archer acknowledges that these women have been used too often to generalize their social group, she also admits that because they are so visible and copiously recorded, it is almost impossible to discuss late medieval English noblewomen without resorting to descriptions of them. In her conclusion, Archer complains that for too long study of these five women has led to "unhelpful" general conclusions, and the historian must try to achieve a sense of balance between these extraordinary women and noblewomen in general.

Chapter 7 is the obligatory nod to Margery Kempe and her extraordinary *Book*. Through her book, Margery is very available and open to examination by historians, yet still she remains an enigma. R. N. Swanson recounts the history of the text now known as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and acknowledges that Margery

Kempe is "probably the most-written-about woman of medieval England; not a bad record for someone almost unknown until the 1930s" (141). The copious, detailed informational footnotes present current literature on Kempe and the several schools of thought regarding her *Book*.

Margaret Aston's chapter, "Lollard Women," is a distillation of her years of research into popular religion, Lollards, other reforming groups, and iconoclasm in medieval England.[4] Lollard women were particularly feared because they were women who believed they too could interpret scripture, and because as women, they remained underground, not usually noticed by seekers of heresy. Aston notes, "in the few surviving records of large-scale anti-heretical proceedings in England, women are much outnumbered by men" (169).

This is a large book packed into 185 pages, and rich reading for both graduate students and professors; the notes alone are worth a close reading. I would suggest that this book could serve as assigned reading for both graduate and upper-level undergraduate classes in History of Religion, Women's History, or the History of England.

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END NOTES

1. Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women—Volume I: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England; Volume II: Female Religious Communities in England, 871–1066* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).
2. Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994).
3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994).
4. For example: Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws against Images*. Vol. 1. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).